

## **Fact sheet 8: How do I commission research or evaluation work from an external agency?**

---

This fact sheet aims to give you information to help you to understand:

- The steps involved in writing a commissioning specification for an external agency to undertake evaluation, research or a needs assessment.

It will also provide links to other useful fact sheets and documents that relate to commissioning research or evaluation.

### **Why commission?**

Due to limited time, resources or expertise it may be preferable to commission some research or evaluation work from an external agency. Use of an independent organisation when conducting evaluation work can also avoid any potential for bias for or against a particular service or programme.

### **Principles of commissioning**

The National Audit Office (<http://www.nao.org.uk>) have a 'Successful Commissioning Toolkit' and outline principles of successful commissioning that can be applied to commissioning a variety of projects or services, including research and evaluation projects, insight work and needs assessments. It states that holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must commit to commissioning with honesty and integrity in order to achieve a fair and transparent contracting process. Commissioners must facilitate the involvement of a broad range of suppliers to ensure appropriate and proper use of public funds, value for money and the best services for users and communities.

Contracting research or evaluation work out to an external agency, should follow a tendering process in line with the commissioning policies of your organisation, including the contract thresholds at which a number of competitive quotes are required.

### **Specifying the brief**

It is useful to outline your requirements in a commissioning specification or brief, which will ensure that the external agency understands what the project entails and can tailor their response to your needs. When writing a 'request for a proposal' (RFP) or commissioning specification/brief to commission research or evaluation work you should include as much information as possible to ensure that you receive appropriate proposals. Providing a detailed outline at this stage, of the project's objectives and what you want to commission, should ensure that you will be given all the information you need in order to make an informed and fair comparison between providers and select accordingly.

Generally, you should structure your specification so it:

- introduces your project or service (e.g. The Stop Smoking Service) and provides background information;

- discusses what you want to do (e.g. conduct an evaluation to assess the effectiveness and impact of the service); and
- detail what you want to commission to help achieve this (e.g. some insight work to explore...or a quantitative study to investigate...).

A suggested template for a commissioning specification can be found here [Commissioning spec template for Evaluation Projects](#). When working through it, you should provide as much information as you can about:

### **Background**

- About Wirral (population, demographics, other relevant information) and the organisation commissioning the work.
- The issue you are addressing and the project/programme/service or initiative being used to address it, including the intended audience of the service.
- Any existing research/literature that has been used to formulate or inform your work in this area.

### **Your research objectives**

- What is the purpose of the research or evaluation?
- How will the research or evaluation findings be used?
- What is the key information needed from the research or evaluation?

### **Target audience**

- Specify the target audience of the evaluation (it may be different to the intended audience of the service itself, for example if non users are to be involved) and their characteristics.
- Mention the source of the audience e.g. Will we provide a database of contacts or expect them to recruit participants from another source?

You may also wish to outline examples of key stakeholders who you would like to be involved in the research/evaluation/needs assessment.

### **Approach**

You can provide an outline of the methodology you expect or invite them to suggest an alternative methodology. Consider:

- Will the information need to be quantified. Do you need to find out how many? If so, you may want to suggest a survey, for example, and specify sample requirements. Agencies can also be invited to suggest sample sizes based on information provided by you as to the size of the population or service user/staff base.
- Or is more in depth information needed? Do you want to find out why? If so, a more qualitative study may provide more usable data.

### **Deliverables**

It is important to be clear about what you expect the provider to produce for their project, e.g. a presentation, a workshop and/or a report (electronic or paper based? How many copies?). You may also wish the agency to consider and propose appropriate channels for dissemination of the findings.

### **Timings**

Specify timings for:

- Proposal submission deadline
- Presentations for short listing if applicable
- Notification for the successful agency
- Inception meeting
- Fieldwork
- Deliverables

## **Budget**

Suggest a budget, budget ceiling or simply ask for costs (it is better to give a guide price). Specify whether the budget given is inclusive or exclusive of VAT. You may want to suggest that interested organisations provide you with a 'Shopping list approach' where they suggest alternative methodologies that you can choose from in a mix and match style. However, be sure to warn that proposals will not be considered if the essential components of their 'shopping list' arrive at a total higher than the overall budget e.g. "Proposals will be welcomed that offer a 'shopping list' approach. However, it must not be the case that any components deemed essential to meeting the objectives of the commissioning brief cannot be met within the £20,000 ceiling budget."

## **Project team**

You should request that information is provided about:

- Who will manage the project?
- What skills do the project team have? They should include CVs.
- Have they done similar work before? They should provide examples of key experience.

## **Formalities**

- When is the proposal required? Date and time.
- Who should it be sent to? Key contact should be supplied and this contact should be designated to answer queries or requests or more information from interested parties.
- What format do you want the final proposal supplied in? e.g. Email or written.
- Are there any procurement formalities needed? Do agencies need to complete a Pre qualification questionnaire (PQQ)? Do they need to include details of their professional indemnity insurance and/or quality criteria and/or policies such as equality and diversity.

## **Other points to consider:**

- Are there any elements of the work that need to be completed internally or that require cooperation from internal stakeholders (e.g. Access to data and databases needs considering before the research or evaluation project starts)? It may be advisable to conduct some elements in house, such as printing and posting of letters or survey materials to keep costs down. If you consider whether there is capacity in house for these tasks before submitting the commissioning brief you will know whether they need including in the specification.
- Consider consent of participants and any data protection issues that might arise from the proposed research. You will require consent from participants to be contacted by the external agency (they have given their personal information to the service but not to an external agency). This can take time, and resolving issues of access to data before the contract is awarded can save time at the commencement of the project.
- In some cases, ethical approval may need to be explored, see [Factsheet 13: Ethical considerations in research and evaluation](#) and again, resolving this before awarding a contract may be important for your timescales.
- Consider who will manage the evaluation and liaise with the provider. They will need to be involved in the commissioning process and should be named in the brief.

- Consider who will shortlist and select the successful provider as they will also need to be involved in the commissioning process.
- Consider whether you will want the provider to work with a steering group and mention the potential for this in the brief. Presence at meetings or negotiation with stakeholders via a steering group may need to be factored into the offer made by interested agencies.
- It is worth including what 'progress update' expectations you have in the brief. Will you require weekly or monthly updates or regular meetings with the provider? Are you content to communicate via email or phone? Time spent at meetings will need to be incorporated into the agency's costs.

## Shortlisting and selecting a successful agency

### Basis for short listing:

- Generally you should not consider short listing any organisation that has not provided a proposal within the allocated budget or that does not address all of the components outlined in the brief.
- Value for money should be considered, along with the extent to which the organisation has shown an understanding and experience of the problem/issue at hand, the research or evaluation to be commissioned, the research methods discussed, the target audience, your organisation and other relevant issues.

### Number to shortlist:

- This will depend upon the number of proposals you receive and your organisation's commissioning policies. However, if selecting organisations to be short listed for interview/presentation there should be a minimum of three competing organisations selected.

### Inviting to present:

- Depending upon the size of the contract and the number of proposals you receive, you may wish to short list organisations and invite them to present their proposal to you and attend an interview. This will enable you to explore their offer in more detail and compare it to the strongest competitors.

### Selecting a panel:

- The panel should be impartial and declare any conflict of interest at the outset. It should include a representative from the project or service involved as well as technical representatives from, for example, R & D, User Engagement or Intelligence who can advise on aspects of the tenders made.

### Selecting the successful agency:

- It is good practice to also supply the unsuccessful agencies with constructive feedback.

### Project inception:

- It is good practice to hold a meeting soon after awarding the contract to discuss any changes to the proposal, introduce key people, discuss contractual arrangements where necessary and ensure the successful team have everything they need to begin working on the project.



### More on this topic and further reading

For an example of a commissioning specification for a research project, see [Example of a commissioning spec for research into worklessness](#).

Useful document: [How to write an evaluation brief](#)